



Supervising Difficult People

An Online Continuing Education Course for Engineers

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Supervising Difficult People

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INTRODUCTION

There have been many times toward the end of my long career of managing employees in public and private venues when I have said to myself, *“I wish I knew then what I know now about dealing with people.”*

People say that experience is the best teacher. Well, I would like to add embarrassment, regret, and frustration are good teachers, too. I wish there had been someone I could have used as a sounding board to talk about the problems I was having with some difficult employees. Maybe received some suggestions about more things to consider than just my narrow, inexperienced perception of the situation.

This course is an attempt to provide that sounding board to you, so you do not have to repeat the mistakes I made. Make some new ones and we can advance the art of supervision and management a little bit. Otherwise, if each generation repeats the mistakes of the previous one, we simply spin our collective wheels and do not move forward.

Once you get into this course, you may think we are taking a long time to get to the meat of *Supervising Difficult People* and you would be right. The reason we do not jump right into dealing with these issues is that some *background knowledge is necessary to help you understand what may be causing the problems*. Once you understand the background information, you can use that knowledge in solving the problems we address here plus any new ones that you encounter on the job. Ideally, you will be able to transfer the situational understanding that you gain from this material to many situations at work.

Please share any ideas you gain from this course with your friends and share with me (via this website) suggestions for improving the course or adding to it. Something else I have learned over many years of doing this is that **NONE OF US IS AS SMART AS ALL OF US!**

Dick Grimes

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OVERVIEW

A fact of work life for everyone in a supervisory role (this also includes the terms “management” and “leadership”) is that at some point, you will have to deal with difficult people. Unfortunately, their behavior is rarely difficult enough that you have reason to terminate them on the spot and be finished with the problem. No, they seem to do just enough to become a constant irritation for you but never enough at once to get rid of them.



Your success as a supervisor depends on your ability to deal with them effectively enough that they do not consume a disproportionate part of your time and impede the productivity of your team while getting them to stop the negative behavior. In short, *you cannot allow a minority of employees acting badly consume the majority of your attention.*

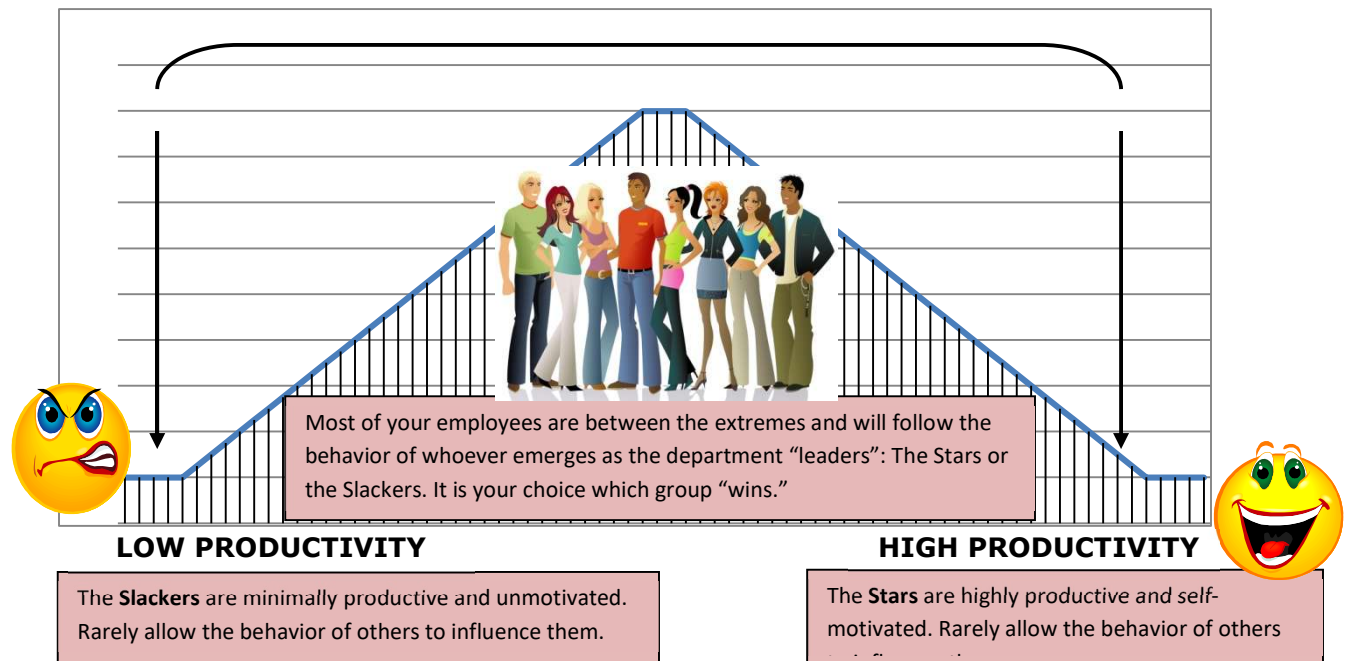
The good news is that you probably have a few good ones that require minimal ongoing care and maintenance to maintain your group’s productivity. A supervisor should not inadvertently reward the difficult behavior of a few with most of your attention. Otherwise, some of your better performers may feel the need to act out to get your attention, too, just as children do in elementary school. (Just because you have employees you consider to be “adult” because of their age does not mean they are also adults behaviorally or emotionally!)

No single person, book, or self-development source can supply the key to dealing with every variation of “difficult people” - there are just too many, it would be too big, and few people would read it. Fortunately, a variation of the Pareto Effect (“20% of something accounts for 80% of the events¹”) can be applied here: *most of the difficult people you will encounter can be dealt with by understanding a few simple principles.* We will present those few simple principles in this course. These are the difficult behavior types we will cover together:

<i>The Bully</i>	<i>The Complainer</i>	<i>The Sniper</i>	<i>The Crude Jokester</i>
<i>The Gossip</i>	<i>The Know-It-All</i>	<i>The Indecisive</i>	<i>The Emotionally Fragile</i>
<i>The Unreliable</i>	<i>The Slacker</i>	<i>Brown Noses</i>	<i>The Phony</i>
<i>The Minimalist (Least I Can Do to Get By)</i>		<i>Can’t Say “No”</i>	<i>The Volcano</i>

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pareto_principle

Think of the behavior potential of your team as this graph. The Stars in your department are at the high end of productivity to the right and the Slackers are on the other side doing just enough to stay employed. Most of your employees are in the middle watching to see if you emerge as the leader who deals effectively and decisively with the Slackers or if they lead you.



OK, that is almost enough preliminary conversation – just one last thing...

Before moving to change their behavior, ask yourself this:

“DOES THEIR BEHAVIOR IMPACT PRODUCTIVITY IN OUR DEPARTMENT OR DOES IT JUST IRRITATE ME?”

If it truly impacts productivity, then act on it. But if it just irritates you without harming productivity, anything you do may result in more aggravation and drama than it is worth. Be sure to pick your battles and keep productivity high.

BEHAVIORAL CAUSE AND EFFECT

Before you consider some behavior that you are seeing as “difficult” and begin to develop strategies to deal with it, we suggest you take a few minutes to “go upstream’ mentally. Try asking yourself, “*What are the specific behaviors (not attitudes) that bother me*” and “*What may be causing them to act like that?*”

If you can identify the specific behavior and its probable cause, you have a better chance of dealing with it successfully than if you simply handle everything the same way. There is an old saying that applies here: “*if your only tool is a hammer, every problem looks like a nail!*” This course will give you many tools with which to deal with the problems you will see.



IDENTIFY THE BEHAVIORS

It is essential that you clearly identify their **behaviors** - not their **attitudes** – before acting. For example, you may want someone to stop being rude to fellow employees. If you simply say, “stop being rude,” you’ll probably get denial (“I wasn’t rude to him”) or get into an argument about semantics (“I was being assertive, not rude”) and you won’t be anywhere near a solution to your problem.

But, if you will focus on their **observable behaviors that a reasonable person would consider to be rude**, you have a much better chance of identifying the problem in such a way that they know exactly what you’re talking about and would make it hard for them to argue with you.

Take a moment to clarify to yourself what specific behaviors you want them to stop doing before saying anything to them. This increases your confidence level and helps you sound more assertive when you talk to them.

- “**Stop interrupting him when he’s trying to make a point.**” (A reasonable person witnessing their behavior would agree that he interrupted.)
- “**Stop rustling your papers (clicking your pen, drumming your fingers) when he’s speaking.**” (A reasonable person witnessing their behavior would agree that he was rustling papers, clicking their pen, or drumming their fingers.)

Suppose you were on a jury hearing a case about a former employee claiming, “Unlawful Discharge” by his employer. You read the note below from a disciplinary report the defendant (the manager of the employee who is suing the employer) wrote about the plaintiff (the employee suing the employer for unlawful discharge).

“John still has a bad attitude about work. He takes no pride in his work nor shows any professionalism in the way he deals with customers or co-workers. When I try to correct him, he gets all worked up and talks disrespectfully about the department and the company.”

- What questions would you have? (Note: he has a “bad attitude.”)
- What would you want to know? (Note: competent if he can do the job.)

Two things are

1. You must be **vindictive** to be a

- “You failed to attend to your duties while not attacking...”
- “You’re late to work and bully while...”

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Which of these descriptions is most likely to be expected? Why?

This description: *Documentation shows Joe’s production results compared to his job description of what the company pays him to produce.*

[“Joe’s job description as a machine operator (attached) specifies the department standard requiring a minimum average of 30 pieces per hour. His production this week has averaged 23 per hour.”]

Or this description: *Joe has a bad attitude about work.*

The answer is the first one because it deals with objective facts. The company pays Joe for productivity and not for having a “good attitude.” (Think about this...you have probably seen an employer keep a highly productive employee that could not get along with people. The reason is that, unless they *are paid to get along with people such as waiting tables, hospitality services, or customer services*, then productivity is the priority and you must address that in a complaint unless their attitude impacts someone else’s productivity. We will talk about that later in this course)